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Post-tobacco crop: ethanol corn

IN LEXINGTON, GROUP TOUTS EATING THE GRAIN, REFINING THE STALKS TO RUN CARS

 By Jim Niemi
 ASSISTANT BUSINESS EDITOR

A team of environmentalists on a Midwestern tour stopped in Lexington yesterday to promote the use of ethanol to power motor vehicles.

The environmentalists, members of the Natural Resources Defense Council, were driving a Ford Escape hybrid SUV with a gas-electric motor and a Chevrolet Impala fueled with E-85.

E-85 is a blend of 15 percent gasoline and 85 percent ethanol, a combustible liquid refined from plant matter such as cornstalks.

"Kentucky can really play a big part in ending our dependence on foreign oil as well as boosting the local economy," said team member Eben Burnham-Snyder.

Burnham-Snyder pointed out that Kentucky is a major agricultural state, and that farmers -- especially those seeking an alternative crop to tobacco -- could profit from using their land to produce plants that can be converted to ethanol.

Ethanol can be refined from non-edible or waste parts of a plant. So with corn, for example, "you can use the cob for the (dinner) plate and the rest of the plant to make ethanol," Burnham-Snyder said.

But corn isn't the only plant from which ethanol can be produced.

"The president earlier this year mentioned switch grass," Burnham-Snyder said, adding that the fuel can also be refined from other wild grasses that can grow anywhere.

Kentucky has far to go, however, before ethanol is a viable alternative for the state's

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motorists. "Kentucky has only one ethanol station, and it's 200 miles from Lexington in Hopkinsville," he said. "There just aren't enough stations where it's convenient to fill up."

The price of E-85 is 30 cents to 40 cents cheaper in such states as Illinois and Indiana, where stations that stock the fuel are more common, but the farther the stations are from refineries, the higher the price, Burnham-Snyder said.

The four-member team from the Natural Resources Defense Council is completing its Midwestern tour Friday after stops in West Virginia and Virginia.

The council is a national environmental group with 1.2 million members and offices in Washington, D.C.; New York; Los Angeles; San Francisco; and Beijing. The group will open another office in Chicago this fall.

The group is spreading the word of the advantages of E-85 as a domestically produced motor fuel while serving as a boon to U.S. farmers.

"We're hoping Kentucky becomes the switch-grass state, instead of the Bluegrass state," Burnham-Snyder said.



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